

IF I WERE ON FIRE

By

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in English and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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Date Defended: 5 April 2011

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## ABSTRACT

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A collection of seventy-two original poems by Michael J. Argumedo as a thesis for the Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Kansas University, subsequently published under the pseudonym Mickey Cesar by Spartan Press (Kansas City, 2011).

## **fireplaces**

Spires stab low-slung clouds  
with grey silhouette, as church bells  
settle into sidewalks, down fences,  
and echo under porches;  
dogs snort and root through dumpsters  
on the south side of elementary schools,  
padding bloody paws through  
beer-bottled snowdrifts.

Embers of yesterday's sports page  
catch their tails sometimes,  
and as the hymns of halftime  
shudder storm windows all along the street,  
fireplaces cough coarsely,  
evergreens pop,  
and a mouse explains his death in a ventilation duct.

## portraits

Mister Black does not want  
to become a walking caricature  
in anyone's animation.

He shifts himself every morning,  
hoping to blend into his surroundings,  
no two days ever the same.

On sunny afternoons, seated  
on an iron bench outside the Greyhound Station,  
he must sometimes wave away the suspicion  
that every landscape has been painted,  
that even waking makes him  
the product of someone else's creation.  
Brushes follow his every footstep,  
and he hates them:  
every angry young mother,  
every sleepy security guard  
seems to have slowed,  
drawn progressively poorly.

At the bench, with folded hands in his lap,  
Mister Black plans his escape:  
soon enough, soon enough, by God,  
he will paint with grenades.

**63 lune street, LA1**

So the streets are cold and wet;  
the hours leave time to think  
of shrunken heads, to contemplate  
uniformed English girls  
with sallow cheeks  
and long legs.

The sunlight slants low through  
chimneys and rooftops  
on unemployed afternoons,  
and as you regret  
the last American cigarette  
you brought  
in a suitcase  
the bus up the block  
unloads schoolgirls in blue,  
one two,  
one two.

You realize for the third time  
you didn't bring  
enough warm clothes for the winter  
while you wait at the cafe  
for that one friend,  
that other foreigner  
who kisses your rumpled face  
in the morning.

In theory you both speak the same language,  
something beyond the odd talk of coins in pockets  
but these songs are merely early flights  
soliloquies of cigarette butts  
coffee-spoons  
and the rumbling uptown bus.

## **aurora borealis**

Between alarms, she stirs, sighs, and tells you  
she's been having those dreams.

Her breath on your chest is a blast furnace.

For nine minutes you feel  
the weight of her on your neck  
until the alarm sounds again.

Bedroom to coffeemaker  
is a short cold voyage you feel in your heels  
but some mornings – ones like these –  
the transit feels like twenty-three years.

In the darkness beyond the basket, the filter,  
and the five spoonfuls of awful Robusta  
you brew like an insane penance,  
you remember all the things she doesn't:  
sharp words with a waiter. A broken cellphone.  
Cheshire smiles all around,  
a wet kiss for a stranger on an elevator.  
And as your coffee burbles and sighs into its carafe,  
rippling in the weak light of a snowy five a.m.,  
you set your coffee cup aside;  
it is one of a set,  
but solitary still,  
and quiet.

## **the promises of girls**

On waking,  
he finds the house whistles.  
It might be the pipes, but  
it seems wiser to wait,  
as his breath is short,  
and the bath may hold  
questions he cannot answer with any certainty.

The window muddies everything,  
but daylight is arrived,  
newly foaled,  
unsteady on its feet.

Somewhere an alarm clock lurks,  
threatening the morning  
like the scent of a stranger's breath  
or unkept promises.  
Fingers make their first reports,  
and his spine complains in multiple voices,  
and as small traffic noises filter in past the door,  
he reminds himself of the old lesson:  
there is no such thing  
as an easy escape.



## **cooking for nicole**

By hour, by minute  
the contents of kitchen cabinets,  
imperfectly packed, brown. When the sun  
streaks through grease-stained glass  
the tiles beneath your feet engage  
reflections on  
consumption, and it is with a certain weariness  
that you make something  
out of what remains:  
bits lying about appliances,  
canned beans, old cabbage,  
the last wedge of cheese,  
eggs. It is an inevitable ritual  
you undertake, a genetically  
coded labor.

You slice onions on the counter  
and in the dying light of evening,  
fry them.

## **the most striking thing**

You've made no mistake.

You're quite right,  
for it is clearly tattooed on your forehead  
in blue ink.

Over the years, you've concluded that  
mirrors lie;  
and similarly, photographs  
are only slightly more honest than that,  
but so much these days seems blurry  
and obscure  
you have trouble trusting  
or believing circumstantial evidence.

It is obvious when you walk downtown.  
Your latest lover sees it when you sleep.  
Your mother always knew it was there  
but said nothing.

You've tried to erase it with clenched fists,  
but oftentimes it is  
the most striking thing about you,  
the thing  
which people remember forever.

Elsewhere, the latest murder remains unsolved.  
Someone sees Jesus in a bakery window.  
An old man dies in his bedclothes.  
Two lovers have tired of each other on the train to Trieste,  
but here, for that mark on your forehead,  
you cannot sleep.

## **mere accidents**

It is just coincidence, Aunt Edna,  
mere coincidence.  
The last harvest brought mice.  
The owl followed.  
Jason was transferred to Pittsburgh  
by men working from spreadsheets.  
The light outside dims because  
the sun sets every evening.  
I felt it too, but the spring rains  
made our foundation sink just a bit;  
the door swings open, the latch  
needs oiling. I've said  
the appropriate phrases, Aunt Edna.  
I set an extra plate in the kitchen,  
but no one came. Thick steam of  
beef and onions still lingers in the cupboard.  
I can't explain, but have faith:  
it all makes perfect sense.

## **expiration dates**

Oak leaves crisp  
under winter's last layer  
of ice. Weak branches lay in early graves;  
slush gathers thick at  
intersections, the curbs  
on the shaded side of the street,  
and by late afternoon come  
the noiseless tracks of unpolished boots.  
The evening brings taxicabs,  
pizza deliveries, poor radio reception,  
and another freeze.  
The windows have not been cracked since last spring,  
the last time  
she was here to touch them.

A draft remains.

Expiration dates are not enough:  
some things should show themselves  
the curb: toasters, teapots, second-hand furniture.  
The furnace seems a bit weaker this year.

A young girl touched your hand once,  
strangely reassuring, but you awoke,  
your room still dark save the streetlights outside,  
the green glow of your VCR,  
the fingers on your clock.

## **other children**

At noon, the sun falls short of the porch.  
Tobacco drifts over pages, and from over your shoulder  
skips the sound of sketching, erasers.  
A writer at rest worries his nails, considers  
how this century keeps them clipped close,  
how children speak in whispers.

Check your pockets now, my friend:  
a fetish from some decades past may be brushing  
uncomfortably against your leg.

There is soft footfall in gravel  
at this spot where the sidewalk ends;  
there are remnants of flesh on the tip  
of the morning's first cigarette,  
and somewhere, young mothers bet  
the sunlight will tilt closer down the concrete  
in another hour, that it might  
touch their feet.  
Pray for them: place that coin beneath your tongue,  
keep that talisman close at hand,  
for you are young and Egyptians should never touch your eyes;  
we should spend our lives at  
exclusively American tables  
where utensils are so easily buried,  
and the walls are awash with scents and flesh.  
Let us never tire of it, and should  
the service slow somehow, we could  
drown in older spirits,  
rub our sweat into the woodwork  
and comment on framed portraits  
of other people's children:  
they exist in glyphs and ciphers,  
crooked lineages you and I  
will bend to our own design.

## **sparrows**

It rains all morning.  
Sparrows chirp at afternoon traffic  
from the eaves and gutters of eighth street.  
The asphalt shimmers with oil.

Sidewalks surrender the cigarette butts of winter.

Next week it is April.

Tied beneath the awning of a coffee-shop

a dog pines unhappily alone,

unable to share his stories:

a beating,

a bone.

Crabgrass forces its way

through a crack in the concrete.

Your letter arrived last week,

postmark smudged by wet spring fingers.

## **elegy for jennifer gardner**

There were broken beer bottles  
at the bottom of the basement steps  
when you, hunting for Easter eggs,  
found them with your foot.

You were tender as a girl,  
curling into the corners of  
birthdays and funerals,  
limping toward the musty covers  
of unheated guest rooms.

By the time you disabused yourself  
of collecting Queen Anne's Lace, by  
the time you finally knew that  
every hand turns fist all too soon,  
that little hitch in your step had  
traveled up your back and twisted  
your every movement  
by the slightest fraction.

Could you have ever loved  
the hands that held you down?

You somehow welcomed  
the blunt instrument,  
the blade,  
much as you took that last step  
on Easter Sunday:  
not looking.

On faith.

## **flood plains**

She finds fragments of back-yard Necropolis:  
hollow bits of dim past cenotaph

to string into his necklace.

The music of ambiguously blue Saturdays drifts in,  
a slow harmonic sweep of brittle fingers  
circling buffalo grass and dandelion,  
a cold incantation.

On the other side of the world  
the sun rages on sand,  
islands sway in thick breezes,  
laden with fleshy things. These  
pulse through meridians of the earth,  
following descending veins  
into the hoarfrost  
where whispers carry leagues.

She knows a shiver is also a prayer,  
and certain mornings  
his talisman speaks to her blood,  
to the tendons connecting  
her hand to her wrist,  
to her bones.



## hemispheres

In Kansas, wind gusts fire  
supersonic ladybugs, soft shell  
projectiles. In Lancaster, it rains,  
the sun forever hidden in hills  
and I am bereft – you  
returned my underwear  
unwashed in a plastic grocery sack:  
cruel that it smells like you. Here,  
the grasses lean north in the wind.  
In England, cobblestones never freeze  
though each drop is arctic.  
It rains, and everywhere  
there is drunkenness, silences  
punctuated with anger, and the  
subsonic susurrations of emotionally  
remote rivers, steam-heat radiators,  
the BBC; it runs through my guts,  
sends clutching hands into my pockets,  
and I alone remain uncertain  
which side of the world  
you left me.

## **the pathology of cutting**

He had  
an interest in injuries, the image  
of heroin, developing the vocabulary of insects.  
Imagine paper. Imagine  
her skin, her silk. Imagine the taste  
of baby powder and turpentine, the scent  
of God's industry, riveting pages, punches, stamps.  
Imagine sheets, her skin. Imagine  
Nicole at the foot of the machine,  
pressing manifestoes. She slices card stock,  
videotape, pastes  
a million companions into her books.  
Edit, cut, shoes and hair undone. She knows  
displaced words lose their semiotic value  
through repetition, her silk, her skin,  
her hand still  
tending the machine. The pathology  
of saws and razors results  
in a thousand soft cuts. She reads  
reports of injuries, imagines, edits,  
leaves the library,  
walks to the art museum, her skin  
exposed to April  
all goosebumped,  
and she knows  
there is a utility in not knowing  
the powder, the paint thinner,  
the dialect of insects,  
the rain.

## **states of grace**

Should I deconstruct my succubus,  
this shape to whom all my  
ill-gotten incenses drift and curl, or instead  
examine my own hands,  
thin and trembling with alcoholic ache,  
the one unclean, the other  
twice broken on phantoms?

Her every angle begs fresh clay,  
ankle-deep in unwanted attributes  
chipped, chiseled, sawdusted,  
hands and feet redone beyond all recognition.

This work seemed so simple once.

To begin again, I would need to examine  
those Platonic preconceptions, be rid of them,  
and instead sculpt using only exceptions,  
exclusions, incongruities and contradictions,  
ignore the shape waiting within that stone,  
make bone soup from all that fell to the floor  
stroke by stroke.

She will be moods, states of grace, and elegies,  
a gruel brought to boil on an electric plate.

**natalie 9:12**

Darling, this charge, it is an overtone, a shiver,  
the scent of you sweeping in doorways  
spilling inexpensive vintages, cellphones  
and underthings. I have spent a century  
drowning and offer you  
nights entombed in cat hair, cigarette butts,  
and traffic tickets underfoot;  
I shall force your knuckles together and  
anesthetize your ankles.

You are all lips and anxiety, I should  
stroke you into stillness,  
part your hair with my tongue,  
buy groceries, change the litterbox.

When you dominate my closets,  
when you abscond with automatic weapons  
you have made it: you have flown naked  
and shaking over awestruck shepherds.

You are every definition of the sacred and profane  
I can taste in jalapeño and rum on Sundays.

## **hurricane season**

The April snows have evaporated  
from the tips of your nipples.

I have seen you burning,  
burning like rain over English cities  
when you rage, but you and I  
are glacier today, in conflict  
with pebbles.

I bring you flowers  
wrapped in edible plastic.

You bring me  
hurricane.

## **coruscations**

The night the moon spread cold sugar  
on the pool house, we could not breathe  
for the rarefied sweetness of flesh  
we consumed. The hours of sunlight  
had long escaped: the coffee spoons,  
the teas and towels, lapsed  
into limp and tepid dissipation.  
The shower's wet tiles, mosaic, became  
our manic chapel, you and I  
its imperfect acolytes, our evening vespers  
wholly given over to sangria.

When we  
fall out of language, you and I are  
drunk, iced, sore, and broken. Our teeth  
touch, our bodies reflect darkshine  
saccharined, our bones haphazardly laid  
in unadorned ossuaries, placed farther  
from each other than the sun ever was  
from us.

## **strands**

The former Soviet Union  
covered eleven – count them, eleven –  
time zones. Consider  
all those far-flung hours: you  
disrobed in Greenwich Mean,  
Eastern Standard,  
left discarded underwear  
in Central Daylight.

Months and years do not weigh so much on your hips  
as these hours,  
when the sweat which pools on your stomach  
creates a small lake, an Aral Sea,  
an eddy of decisions and revisions which  
an hour can reverse when damp sheets dry.

You have carried your native skirts  
into a hundred exiles,  
hung lovely in a dozen closets,  
then left here, in Kansas,  
a single strand.

## **an ordinary noise and seventeen things**

High John the Warrior Root.  
Essential oils of  
balsam and vinegar.  
Love Lucky Lode-Stone  
and black cats' bones;  
a blue-eyed woman  
burning her father's last letter,  
slick paperbacks  
and untested theories.  
Dorothy, Scarecrow on the wall.  
Toto's shrunken head in the basement,  
steeped with gin in a Mason jar.  
Wax and scented sheets.  
Ordinary noises leak in  
from the laundromat next door,  
drift through locks of hair  
culled from the men's room floor,  
and fingernails  
in a box  
locked away from the moon.



## sacrilege

You arrived on a sidewalk  
disappointingly dressed.  
The sense of loss  
which followed my first notice  
comes not so much  
from the weakened cotton  
which clings to your hips  
and breasts, but  
the fact  
that you are dressed  
at all.

Had Paul  
ever seen you naked, ever  
watched you skip into the kitchen  
clutching a couch cushion  
– for the sake of some modesty  
between me and your dog,  
ever dueling for touch and taste –  
seen you scampering  
for a green tea following  
insistent summer sex,  
he would never have written  
the Corinthians.

Know instead  
it is sin itself that you own clothes,  
and the world's loss  
when you wear them.

## locus point

Between poets and psychologists  
in the chigger-ridden grasses of rented back yards  
there lie

One: vodka, cigarettes, barking dogs and the dialectics of  
futon and floor, underthings  
clustered around ankles. Two:  
ill-rehearsed lines, character studies  
common disorders.  
Three: words by  
shower curtains,  
*don't flush, I'm almost done.*

Between organic greens and teas,  
waxes, half-moons and unfortunate infections,  
vowels and vacuums  
lie subjects, declarations,  
old growths, a conditioned  
call and response, recurrences,  
bruises and blood,  
scratches, tar pits,  
pendulums and symphonies,  
clinics, diagnoses,  
disease.

## **physics in welding**

We have spent a century in garages,  
our words echoing tinny within corrugated steel,  
only to fall flat into cat litter,  
flat into oil stains,  
flat onto concrete.

We sat on driveways  
trimmed hedges  
spread fertilizer and  
hoped for the best,  
waiting for some realtor to return  
and tell us  
we've done well.

Forever, we said.

Fools.

It seemed such a simple alchemy,  
this joining of base metals  
through the careful application  
of electrical current;  
a few joules, a few billion  
negative particles  
create  
a flawless seam.

## capricorns session one

Doctor, I am just so many different  
things these days, I am a series of slammed doors,  
I am  
continually guessed at, and  
the most beautiful things,  
soft and fragrant,  
conjure me confusedly.

I am sick of being at their mercy, doctor:  
I swear, if I were on fire, no one would bother  
to piss on me to put me out.

Each day I awake naked, but as soon  
as I move I am smothered by unfamiliar names.  
Songbirds mock me continually,  
but if I had any talent for music  
I would undoubtedly compose  
snapping sinew and broken bones;  
this woman proposed I soak myself  
in jimson-weed water, wash my eyes  
with salt and clay from the banks of the Wakarusa River,  
avoid Capricorns and American cigarettes,  
but she kissed me with garlic  
and monosyllables but then  
I ached even worse than before, doctor,  
and every time she tries to help  
I hear another slamming door  
and I think the problem might be  
I just can't stop thinking  
even when her needles go in and I  
try on those words of hers but I  
still hear those small snappings  
with every goddamn step I take,  
and everywhere I go  
people butcher my name.

## the lesson

He writhes and kicks,  
screaming, trembling,  
the skin at his narrow wrists  
burning sunshine and cinnamon oil,  
gripped and dragged  
along a gravel path.

His father knows  
he has lived  
far too long  
insulated by doors and screens,  
mother soothing every wound,  
shirts well-pressed and creased.

The edge of the wood  
just past the fence looms  
before endless insects.

His shaking legs know  
how the gravel path  
grinds out and perishes  
in the throats of sparrows;  
beyond his mother's call  
the lake  
where things sting and crawl  
stirs, its bitter water  
alive with antagonistic eyes,  
cutting wings.

## **the strain**

Brother, born with teeth so sharp  
they cut his tongue:  
didn't talk much.

Sister, with twelve toes and stormy eyes  
kept a steady hand on the butcher's knife.

They kicked around a half-dead basketball  
to roll in the construction dust  
between them,  
feeling the strain on mosquito-marked ankles,  
showering gravel for the bats to catch.

You can see them sometimes  
among fireflies,  
the crescent moonrise,  
the flickering streetlights.

**sarah says**

Sarah recalls  
all the fractured voices which  
skipped off sheet-metal doors and grates  
throughout the clinic,  
manic energized by  
bands of sunlight:  
rigid mosaic  
barriers and borders  
wax disinfected  
byzantine in green and white.

Sarah knows voice and shadow  
slice silence and light, the sting  
of a dozen ragged cuts;  
in other rooms,  
howlings muffle in cinderblock.

## **meditations on watching your enemy eat**

By poorly-placed tent stakes,  
beetles cling to your skin;  
hollow knots of kerosene  
drift near your heels,  
but the match yields  
little satisfaction.

You are                      the freak  
disenchanted with the ringmaster,  
the dull-bladed saboteur lately enlisted  
for the dog and pony show:  
the one who hates music.

There is a strong-box beneath the passenger seat,  
bare wires below the dashboard,  
and you unwisely depend on harlequins for justice when  
the barker carries a bullwhip,  
the magician's wife, a knife.

Everything disintegrates at a touch:  
the last slice poised on a counter top,  
greasy wrappers sprawled beside  
ungrounded power cords and bits of cheese,  
while a hundred yards away  
laughter trims the last fat from the breastbone,  
and the dishes wait to be washed.



## **sunday at the strip mall**

Mister Black gets paid  
to mop blood,  
to scrub brains,  
to sanitize the instruments  
of imperfect surgeries.

This work makes for long days,  
but it is a sunny trip  
to the dumpster, almost pleasant  
if the kids from the burrito place  
aren't back there smoking.

At sunset, he uses blue stuff on the glass out front  
before locking up and  
crossing the street to wait for the bus  
where women in cars,  
anxious at stop lights, never see him:  
they are  
almost beautiful at times.  
Today, the sad girl on the southbound six-fifteen  
is missing. Tomorrow he gets paid.

## late models

Summer has you sitting in broken glass again  
on a short break from the bakery,  
back on the loading dock where diesel engines rumble,  
when suddenly girls flock on the street  
just out of reach;  
fifteen and newly sexy, some half-dozen,  
tiny tops stretched over breasts  
that God surely didn't intend  
and as your eyes slide down  
taut tummies to untouched waistlines  
you think, blood rising to your cheeks,  
such things should be locked up:  
the school system isn't doing its job.

But it's summer and somehow seven miles south  
of nowhere you live between parking lots,  
apartments, and bars, and you vaguely sense that  
a marginal credit rating and a decent car  
are all that qualify you for the human race these days,  
but for now your cigarette burns your fingertips  
and you're confused when one of those  
newly-minted models in the distance smiles your way  
and break time evaporates,  
leaving you sitting in bottle caps  
and broken glass.

## **phalanges, fittings, and forgotten geography lessons**

These are the implacable ghosts of hardware stores:  
stacks of calendars, army commendations,  
cardboard boxes, old cologne,  
leather belts and plain soap;  
they occasionally coalesce in corners,  
or follow you through aisles.

When leather-soled shoes crisp on unwaxed tiles  
and catch you breathless,  
indecisive between shelves of ten-penny nails  
and a cornucopia of gaskets,  
think of nothing:  
that voice is unfamiliar, you must insist,  
and the smell of sawdust in the garage  
a phantom  
a thousand years distant.

There is nothing esoteric under florescent fixtures,  
no curses stenciled in flat black or olive drab  
hidden under racks and shelves  
of plumber's fittings, caulk guns, and hinges,  
just these echoes of AM stations  
and a muffled cough  
which might or might not  
call you by name.

**alison, indelicate**

She looks great  
in bra and panties,  
on those  
rare occasions when  
she thinks you're still sleeping.

She is wonderfully indelicate,  
the way her calves flex  
when she reaches into high cabinets.

She pours water into the coffeemaker  
furtively, whispering an odd injunction  
for it to remain quiet while brewing;  
you peer over blankets  
distracted that the cat  
might give you away with a yawn.

The blank moments between  
the first percolation and pour  
are perfection:  
she languishes a cigarette,  
elbows up, thighs slightly parted,  
at the table in the kitchen  
while you drowse in blue thoughts  
from the bedroom.

## **dissipation**

The scent of flesh, baths, and morning sex  
filters into summer afternoons:  
soft sandalwood and vanilla touches  
remind you that you are still alive despite  
these short-breathed mornings of  
vodka-ached shoulders and strained necks.

That moment of thirst and darkness  
is slow to dissipate;  
the morning is a stiff assembly of pieces, colors,  
a reconstruction of limbs, and afterimages  
of teenaged girls and freckled shoulders,  
greetings, but they belong to a less criminal domain.

The sun still blazes unexpectedly  
low in the sky when you inventory  
those last bits of your remaining breath,  
when you still feel  
something  
sitting on a park bench,  
even if it is only ache;  
remain still long enough,  
and someone will inevitably  
paint your portrait, do a character sketch  
in shades of black and grey,  
detailing every crack and crease  
in your hands and face, and place you firmly  
on a curbside pedestal,  
spackled, categorized, cauterized into a dim corner  
of the larger universe, formatted, spattered and  
unmoved by the scents of sex and flesh  
which edge into summer afternoons.

## **the american cafe**

Timetables and trains are  
for other countries and complex days  
of sentiment and good-humored recollection,  
but they have no place in the  
American scheme of things,  
where no breeze blows  
and all that touches your cheek  
are noises and impatience:  
even indoors, in sterile spaces,  
flies find your flesh.

You have spent thirty years waiting on girls,  
a dozen looking up from wrought-iron tables  
which tip and talk at your every motion,  
your rusty gestures, and it seems your chin  
is near erased from the touch of your hand;  
appointments are for other folks,  
and you've long since convinced yourself  
that freedom is an option,  
but this heroism isn't evident  
to your skinny-legged companions  
sitting quietly in the corner of this cafe  
with no waitresses, taxis, or ashtrays,  
just wallpaper that no one chose  
and a strange humming from the farthest room.

**caroline**

An eight-hundred dollar skirt  
looks twice as rich  
on a fifteen-year-old  
Brazilian girl.

While Summer has  
deep-fried California,  
and the permanent tourists  
beachside have finally realized  
that their faults caught up with them years ago,  
old men consider their viewing habits  
through dark glasses  
rimmed with lime.

Twice as rich in kiwi  
and coconut oil,  
rich in chocolate and daiquiri,  
these Neapolitan delectables and delicacies  
steam September coastlines far more often  
than recurring ocean currents,  
and on rented porticoes  
overlooking paving stones and drying grasses  
in the shortening shadows of Santa Lucia,  
old tomcats sun themselves  
smoking.

Caroline has left for the parking-lot.

This evening, whiskers twitch in the wind,  
and every piece of the puzzle  
dim behind the window-screen  
has long since  
been fitted perfectly.

**letter # 2,939**

It is so damn hot today, and every  
unhappy woman walking downtown  
in sunglasses and uncomfortable shoes  
looks like you,  
and I wonder if you might have  
gotten married in Las Vegas again,  
lost another baby  
or gone back to Indiana,  
but then  
what little I've achieved since  
would seem such a weak greeting  
were we to trip over each other's feet  
and exchange spiked pleasantries:  
we might mention a few new lovers found and lost,  
comment on the same old cigarette jones which has  
seriously begun to kick my ass,  
and, of course, my crippled poems.

Every year our imaginary daughter  
gets taller, and I hope  
she never meets a boy like me  
when the pavement blisters on days like these,  
when the cats sweat under porches  
and birds bake in the trees.



## **fermentation**

The last gnat makes its way  
into the corner of an eye. Straw  
stirs into the lower layers of air  
where wasps wait. Through the trees  
the tones of a manic calliope linger.

Sunset flinches through the spokes  
of wheels, tent stakes splinter  
in hard earth. Broken grasses weep  
from the tracks of trailers and  
the hooves of angry horses.

Celebrate raised voices, denim, a sea of belt-buckles  
and crotches, crying babies. Mosquitoes  
sing elegies from the darkened amphitheaters  
of encroaching ditches. The witch waits. All eyes  
revert to a certain height, bellies and knees.

The bonfire begins soon.

The clowns will come,  
fueled by fermented children:  
they tease,  
shriek,  
and beckon.

## **spearmint tea, tracks and trestles**

The sun settles  
on the far side of the river,  
under cover of beechwood, oak, and elm;  
in the shadow of grain silos,  
the Union Pacific trestle  
offers no sure footing:  
we either follow, or fall.

I might remain idle  
here on the east side of the levee  
but for your blinking in the wind,  
and the shortness of breath  
I heard on your waking;  
I could hardly condemn you  
to another night  
on these sheets.

Our feet form a strange forest  
for bullfrogs, chiggers, fireflies  
and copperheads, our hands  
a trembling bower, mosquito cover;  
we have nothing, we are blind,  
our breath barely mixed with the  
exhalation of cicadas, our spirits  
so far removed from any ancient altar,  
our tongues so torn from each other  
that we form monosyllables,  
yet hear nothing at all.

God answers back from the pulse in your neck;  
the river refuses to bend.

## **nearing midnight**

Unsettled dogs scavenge late in back yards,  
scenting the alley. Fences lean for  
the dark earth with the same urgency  
that makes us sink in our chairs  
by candlelight, heavy with July  
atmospherics. Our words  
flicker past the patio's edge,  
gently insinuate themselves into the grass.

We have stayed untouched for many months,  
our bodies sore from repeated beatings;  
when the night breeze bends branches over us  
we must cede our daylight designs to the wind  
as the dogs erupt, throaty  
and violent  
at the ends of their chains.

## **the day we made sangria**

In July, the heavy scent of California wine  
mixed with laundry detergent and rust  
to bathe the spare tire,  
the jumper cables.

We had rented an evening,  
a patio, borrowed  
a punch bowl, stole  
tumblers, wrote jokes  
on index cards  
for the event. The kitchen groaned  
under miniature mountains of sugar  
surrounded by  
grapefruit skins  
melon slices  
cantaloupe  
lemon  
and orange wedges,  
all ready for  
a small bacchanal,  
but that night, when we turned into the drive  
our contents shifted, shattered  
in a brilliant crash of inexpensive vintage,  
leaving six gallons of California 1991  
to seep into the hatchback,  
the wheel well all summer pungent  
under glistening bits of broken glass.

## **barbed wire and irrigation hours**

When we unwound ourselves,  
we became more swollen than before.

We took these lessons into the cornfields  
just beyond the pavement's edge  
where asphalt runs into  
gravel runs into  
dust runs into  
still rows reaching for the sun,  
tall before harvest,  
endless.

Still stinging from the serrated leaves  
which attacked our ankles,  
we continued with whips, convinced  
that salvation lay in bare flesh. Our visions  
would dance all afternoon,  
wavering in the earthworm's breath;  
we would cut and slash, in sheer desperation  
but blinking, discover  
nothing had changed:  
we had not learned a thing.  
Sweat ran into the cracks of our skin,  
our salt into small poisonous streams.

Beaten, we each  
defied the splint,  
shunned the tourniquet, begrudgingly  
admired our marks;  
we might wait for the apocalypse,  
pray the sun might bleach our bones  
but must first negotiate  
the ants and centipedes,  
legion  
hungry  
and patient.

## **electrical storms and wheatshocks**

A cat blackens the barn door.  
The soldiers are still friendly;  
they haven't seen you smile.

Beneath the ash and cedars,  
thin dogs pant and glance sideways.  
A storm brews to the east,  
a lake of rippleless lightning,  
a camera malfunctioning.

From the fencepost, the evening's  
last hawk leans into the breeze,  
exultant in the surety that  
small prey runs riot in the field.

In the distance, the soldiers stand,  
shouldering their weapons. The road  
narrows, and you notice  
the dogs have disappeared  
without a word.

## afternoon showers

*It is now ascertained beyond a doubt, by actual experiment on an extensive scale, that a dead soldier is a most valuable article of commerce.*

*~ London Observer, November 18th, 1822*

The cicada chorus began its  
nightly rendition of the *Messiah*  
when the bone-grinders of Yorkshire ran  
pulverizing  
almost continuously  
the harvest of  
Leipzig.

It is said that we  
never leave our dead,  
but they blossom again  
among the corn and wheat.

**captain fleck machine-gun range 7**

“That's music,” the Sergeant says  
as fifties open up in the morning, drumming  
a strange slow percussion of interwoven lines,  
small thunder.

Cease-fire and  
silence and sparrows return  
while cordite wisps disperse  
in the breeze.

This is the incense.

These are the morning prayers  
of infantry.

Between vespers  
armored acolytes arrive  
bearing Pharaoh's necklace,  
one-hundred rounds  
of sun-kissed brass.

Sergeant-Major smiles:  
the unbelievers run  
when they hear this song  
which opens again  
in quick cadence.



## **finished porches**

Morning declines  
down walls now silent  
with the rustle of lifted skirts,  
and alive with the scent of laundry detergent:  
two spiders converse quietly in the corner  
where frayed elastic recalls spasms  
of a more brutal, drying time.

Something by the baseboards  
has been there two summers or more.

Take heart, my friend, give in to merriment,  
we are still at war.

We will exchange wounds and drinks  
beneath the marquee of a clothing store.

You offer fresh thumbprints to the window;  
I'll take your questions  
and photographs as well.

We will swear to each other  
by darker gates at nightfall.

The sun hangs hatefully  
when the coffee is gone.

You came to collect bullets.  
The spiders went home.

## **burning in a'sayliyah**

Shadows stand straight in the sand;  
an idiot breeze has caught hold  
of phantoms,  
and bolts strike back  
when steel is surprised  
by the call of the muezzin.

And where does the  
wheat-colored girl fit in,  
when sparrows wilt in the heat?

She is tending an oven  
in an open kitchen  
on the other side of the world.

Here, steel and sand  
reach astonishing temperatures,  
and soldiers  
simmer in a slow-broiling sun.

## the charge

*You know nothing of being alone*, she said,  
flashing storm, then sun.  
He has an unshakable faith that no sin exists  
which nights of nakedness cannot erase.  
From the kitchen, a faucet drips,  
and restaurant sounds drift through the hall.

*Again*, she says, *you've never calculated*  
*the kinetic energy of a threat*  
*or the potential charge*  
*in falling apart.*

An unpainted door  
slams back on its hinge in the wind,  
a sand-blown complaint  
on a prairie, where he stands  
all too aware that there are no mountains to be moved,  
and there is no sea to be seen,  
no river to drown in.

He's been reading poems to Kelli by lamplight,  
drawing in the margins of cheap hotel Bibles  
and supermarket scriptures;  
she's been deconstructing blenders,  
lamenting the inflexibility of  
small instruments of torture  
and the utility of improvised explosive devices  
for days, yet said nothing.

*Nothing at all*, she says,  
*you know nothing of being alone.*  
Outside, church bells ring in the distance.  
Near nightfall, the neighbor  
starts his lawnmower as always,  
keeping a crooked eye on the crocus.

## **the psalms of wasps**

I offer you nothing  
save this poverty,  
this idleness,  
this listless pressing into sticky sheets,  
these faint thrusts made  
to drive away  
the frustrating hours  
of broken things  
and antique happinesses.

Come shed your skin,  
leave your humid darkness on the door frame;  
we will watch wasps walk south on  
chipped-paint windowsills  
on breezeless, unemployed August Mondays,  
our pulsing necks still strained,  
our thirsts unchanged.

## **the good earth, demobilized**

This is a strange place for a lighthouse, Stuart –  
with the endless leagues of hay, the wheat shocks  
standing unsteady in the fields. We had mistakenly  
booked passage on a dreadnaught, and served  
stoking coals, but that was long ago, Stuart;  
the burns on my palms have healed, and this century  
finds me uncertain between tack house and tractor.

The sky goes on forever here, a blue subsumed  
by its underlying blanket of insect drift; the irrigation machines  
are amazing mile-long monstrosities which straddle the soil  
like somnolent gods. When we were twice removed,  
prostrate before the furnace, you told me  
stories of Idaho, stories of children, told me  
to grab onto my faith and save it  
for the upcoming harvest.

I did, Stuart, I did  
but this is a strange place for lighthouses and fallow dreams;  
I just wish you could see them.

I do.

## **tonight's fiancé**

Sure, I'll marry you.  
You know where I live.  
I'll leave a key under the doormat  
and you can come in.  
Take everything I have:  
this bag of bones,  
some broken toys.

Wander through these halls you've never seen,  
warm these sheets you've never stained.  
Take everything.  
Even streetlights through the blinds  
make evenings achy and sleepless.

Forget my name.

#### capricorns session four

She's alone in the dark, doctor,  
trying to reach a consensus with the bullet;  
once the tip of the full moon's  
light touches the smoke alarm  
in her kitchen  
    and by here I mean  
    the one without batteries  
she starts,

starts building her F-bomb  
from the fleshy parts  
of every boy she's ever known. Man,  
plants are poisonous. All of them.  
And then she

    I've seen her,  
    I used to live next door  
she does this Satanic thing  
that comes from California;  
I saw the package, and I swear  
she's losing her hair  
from mixing that monstrosity  
and although she's usually alone,  
I've seen, doctor, I've seen  
she's pregnant again  
with small murders  
and even bleach doesn't clean  
her dishes like it used to  
and I really want to help her, doctor,  
I really, really do.

## **terminal velocity**

Unlock the car door again,  
sigh in the still embrace of shredded upholstery,  
sure in the knowledge that no one  
will come to save you.

This engine has seen you through  
many legs of your evolution, from A to B  
to M and back again, ferried a thousand faces  
for you, all your own.

An abutment sounds tempting tonight,  
but as your hand grips the wheel  
you're well aware that recently  
you've developed an aversion for the necessary speed  
for reasons you can't even explain  
while idling.

It is the same thing:  
the dashboard, the radio,  
the cracked windshield, everything  
is the same as it has ever been,  
even the highway, the tumbleweed,  
the cattle on the hillside lowing.



## the myth of failing blood

After days of impossible weight,  
you have begun to doubt  
that gravity exists.

When night falls, and sparrows seek shelter, you discover  
your every move has been scripted  
by a bastard; your dialogues fall  
flat. Streetlights click red to green  
and back, barely pausing  
when your heels catch manhole covers.

Your uncle once recited  
the myth of failing blood  
to your captive cousins,  
and as you fail to recall his  
vein-streaked face properly  
missing  
the dry skin and gin blossoms  
which kissed you with talcum powder  
and test patterns

a chill creeps  
up from the concrete and settles in your socks;  
your belly hurts again, and your spine  
has lost all strength.

The things you taste on  
Saturday afternoons, the usual,  
have become bland despite the constant  
turnover of waitresses, the frayed aprons  
in the back corner. The last strands of crabgrass  
have grown roots in the sidewalk outside.  
Emily has moved to Manhattan,  
and you are paralyzed  
beneath the marquee of a shuttered theater.

## **aisles, hours and shelves**

The half-light beyond bare blinds  
glowers on Westinghouse surfaces, slow-cooking  
cotton lint, damp soap, drying dollar bills  
and a wet wasp's wings.

In back yard poplars, sparrows speak Greek  
in animated chorus.

This is the city of unwanted trinkets,  
the island of ill-fitting doors in sinking frames,  
oversized ashtrays edging windowsills.

Sarah found cigarettes at the grocer's,  
plain packages, cellophane and impatient stares,  
filled the pregnant hours of scuffed wax and sobbing  
with blackberry brandy;  
in the coughing fog of dandelion season  
she here considers undiscovered corners,  
batteries, pens and other instruments  
of unnoticed afternoons,  
quiet and precise,  
immutable,  
thin.

## **passing an island**

She shimmers in and out  
with every touch of the tongue.  
Tonight she is just  
taste and scent, born and burst forth  
like a saltwater spring.

We each have our own oceans, tides,  
our own vast tracts of sea and sky,  
moments of unspeakable sadness,  
slow drowning. She breathes  
in humid mist.

Sailors have long known  
it is not the sudden storm which breaks over the prow  
that sinks them, but more often  
the unchecked stress on the hull,  
the swampish intake of water into the sea-chest  
which makes the cargo shift: she has long known  
this immersion, learned  
to drift. She no longer prays,  
but tonight, in the Tropic of Capricorn, she gasps,  
seized by sudden hope  
until the current curls past  
and is gone.

## **self-reduction**

“You live inside of your head,” she told him:  
he just wondered  
where else he might live.

Each little corner chipped  
is not reduction  
when self-inflicted, he says,  
no:  
he calls it love.

He'd pour himself  
into a drink  
for whichever woman  
might show a certain fondness for it,  
a craving, or simply dubious taste.

Jostling with ice-cubes,  
settling, and  
slightly decarbonating each day,  
he smiles and tells himself  
tonight he's getting drunk.

## **less a stew than anything**

There is a colander,  
companion to the steam cooker  
we find ourselves in. It felt cold  
on our skin, but now hangs on  
the wall above us.

We miss it,  
and instead simmer side by side  
in here. It is said that you  
can't throw a frog into boiling water;  
he's too quick, and would jump out,  
but if you warm the water slowly,  
he too late knows  
he is cooked. We  
went south for a winter  
and stayed. We  
hungered for flesh. We  
aged, and soon enough  
will be reduced to  
grease and bone,  
less a meal,  
less a stew  
than a back-yard gardener's  
fertilizer.

## **weight**

Holding your tongue  
with my fingertips and  
studying the soft down on the nape of your neck  
I am  
so much less than I could say in one breath.

You have somehow switched off  
your identity, filled your throat and cheeks  
with me. You quit trembling  
some time ago, and we lay pressed into sheets,  
hoping somehow to eat ourselves  
into a graver weight.

## **exhalations**

Soaked into cushions,  
we lay beneath clocks,  
engaging final moments.

When your thighs and mine  
smutch together, and our toes  
usher in dénouement,  
I am still stirred.

Desire is criminal. That I would  
want to possess your every breath when  
we are locked together is

an offense.  
I have only  
two hands  
one mouth  
one cock;  
not enough

to keep you from dressing eventually.  
Our bodies grow heavier each hour,  
stitch bits of skin into a single shroud.

Let your blouse rest on the carpet  
a moment more: it is nothing  
without your breasts to fill it.

We need convincing, talk ourselves  
into and out of each other  
when our bodies want silence,  
the carpet, the floor.

## **fruits of our labor**

We dreamed, you and I  
of the arrival of  
outrageous phone bills,  
the King's man at the door,  
the sheriff demanding.  
The cupboard is bare.  
All we do is fuck,  
yet the miller, the cobbler, the tailor,  
and now the King's man  
all want coins.

Even the witch wants a touch of copper  
to tell us that we're screwed.



## **auguries**

We have cigarettes  
lined up like a belt of small-caliber ammunition.

The signs have been there from the beginning:  
bottle caps beneath the sofa,  
scribbled notes on the coffee table  
mean we were never meant  
to mean anything;  
the sun set some time ago, we have  
re-dressed in soiled clothes.

We have often wondered  
at our respective weaknesses, our propensities  
toward violence, prophesied  
our carelessness. We curl into each other's curves  
on third-hand furniture, two tongues  
alive with trembling;  
we consider different tastes,  
and suffer a strange hunger  
in an unused kitchen  
where we sit sometimes, smoking,  
stacking matchsticks into  
small pyramids.

**letter # 3,390**

Some quality of  
non-descript silhouettes  
always recalls  
your face.

It is difficult to acknowledge  
just how pedestrian we were,  
but the unique just seems  
evermore common with the telling:  
the hurried romance,  
unspoken expectations,  
small infidelities  
droll and unremarkable in the end.

Our script called for high drama,  
but the final product  
was vulgar,  
an eight-millimeter short  
that no one would pay  
to see.

## **thanksgiving day, 2007**

A quiet day, cooking turkey  
for the cat.  
No dates,  
no calls,  
no notes  
from lost loves.

And I stretch, my bones  
a year older from the last such  
slope into winter.

Snow dusted yesterday,  
only leaves remain.

Today, there is no use  
in shaving, showering,  
even changing clothes.  
The cat will not notice.  
He will say nothing of  
the latest failed romance,  
or the lack of catnip  
from the girl's soft hands;  
instead, he occupies  
the coldly sunny square of tile  
in front of the oven,  
dreaming turkey.  
Butter.  
Thyme.  
Marjoram.

## **mister black's unfinished business**

Sarah says  
she has seen him  
by moonlight, in a cloud of dark dust,  
with hammer and nails  
working to fix  
a house which burned down  
years ago.

capricorns session twenty-seven

Doctor, I think your words form  
 mists. They dance with breath,  
 swirl into shapes then fade. They  
 are your color, doctor, your shade  
 and language. Any motion, any penetration,  
 no matter how slight, can  
 disturb them, send those  
 curves and singularities rippling through  
 the topsoil to rest in sterile beds.  
 It would seem an innocent waltz, doctor,  
 how your words, those  
 flirtatious vapors  
 insinuate themselves  
 into our skins, but I see clearly,  
 sometimes clearly, doctor,  
 how much deceived you are  
 by the dialectic of you there  
 and me here. You seem to think  
 that thinking about feeling is the same thing,  
 but it isn't, God damn it, it isn't: excuse me,  
 it is thinking, your talking is  
 scent  
 not scalpel, nor jagged edge,  
 broken bones, bruises, talismans,  
 essential oils, fluids, plasma or  
 awful spasms it is  
 an unfathomable distance your language  
 your glaciers your  
 considered opinion and I think, God damn it, doctor,  
 you've forced me again  
 think  
 my language my body my scars  
 are so much saner than yours.

## fugue

Strange now to think of you gone now with your B-team panties and vitamin drink while  
I walk past Watson library sick and wheeze panting from two packs a day longer than  
you've lived now three packs you're no longer there here clear Summer crisped into Fall  
now fucking Winter hateful sunny pavement cold under my coat and I have been broken  
on my dogma smoking talking telling all you me we were a dissonance I could not  
resolve *per se* on Mondays my company my poems my cock you want but it was not  
named and yet fit a definition I am no longer your definition I have slipped outside the  
dictionary west-facing windows Stauffer-Flint Hall lit up you came on Sundays to get  
fucked but thought thought is itself Northern Phenomenon, hellish cold  
you want cake your panties in a ball beneath my futon god damn want but not me you  
think think when your breath is gone your body no love god damn it is the same thing I  
say but there were so many Sundays months of them and desolate Mondays always I  
should have insisted this insisted this is what it is not just for me but for you too but I  
could not resolve  
and snow now I spend nights coffee no whiskey tonight four in the morning your taste  
still on my tongue interstate drive to Kansas City fight kiss overpass abutment goddamn  
guardrail

you are walking your dog in snowfall with your panties on  
and I am painting from memory your body my God.

## wires and winds

Toe to toe, our legs shake,  
and our hands have forgotten their business.

We have made a smooth transition  
to raised voices,  
and it is visible in the way our hips twist,  
bone and belly mirror dancing,  
breath caught  
in raw and sobbing threats.

Your eyes find a new wrinkle in my neck,  
an old scar, or maybe something missed by the razor,  
and I just this moment notice  
your hair is uneven, strands multiply irrationally,  
and your lips quiver.

We have wandered long enough, it seems.

My chest is thinner now, my hands  
cramped with thoughtless labor;  
your arms have weakened from carrying me,  
and your back is all unhappiness, inflexible.

Our legs shiver with the wind,  
and we are naked, our bellies warmed  
by proximity, our ears  
burning, chapped, and swollen.

## **eighth-street basements**

We come to this colander  
to be sieved through  
dark-carved walls, pint glasses  
and barley malt,  
with lit cigarettes to  
loiter with waitresses,  
make note of old angles,  
new carvings and  
recent curvatures.

We are subject to  
unimaginable pressures,  
where the weight of the sea  
has long since slowed the sun's rays  
to a trickle.

If we are lucky,  
Tonya will dance for us,  
leaning on the jukebox,  
her audience.



## **cars and complexes**

Mister Black has had enough.  
He has packed away all the photographs  
of the ones he ever loved,  
having tired of all his  
eschatological bullshit.

God is a quiet, unremarkable light.

In the shadows of candles,  
he records  
his name  
again and again  
to replay, somnolent.  
His carpet  
holds fragments, shed skin;  
his window,  
cars and complexes,  
half-baked identities, broken bottles,  
jake brakes and downshifting semis.

## **escabeche**

Preheat your apartment to three hundred sixty degrees.

Use smelts, fresh anchovies, sardines or whittings,  
plunge them into hot cooking oil  
for five to ten seconds, until they scream  
or you forget the girl for a moment.

Remove them, drain, arrange, and place in  
an earthenware dish. Recall again the old lesson  
that, intentions be damned,  
taste depends on what you actually create;  
sauté two tablespoons finely minced carrot,  
one onion, four cloves garlic. Consider calling.  
Forget it. Add  
salt. Vinegar. Simmer.

## **flattenings**

Should I cover my walls  
with collaged nothings,  
rough glue and obituaries,  
desolate notes to Russian girls?

Picasso had  
a Siamese cat, apples, and mandolins,  
but I have nothing save  
vague sensations, photographs  
to fit in my hand.

I should paint over windows,  
remove ventilation ducts and stuff them  
with women's clothing.

Your sweater is there, my dear.

And your rival's scarf.

A weakness runs through my arms,  
flattening my hands and feet.

## **talk about the weather**

Stuck on the salutation, I can only stutter  
Greetings...? or the explosion  
of every inappropriate suggestion  
that ever formed in my guts?

Perhaps we should speak of the weather?

It is colder tonight.  
This week.  
This month I miss  
so much I shiver  
and I wish,  
as only a child might, I wish  
for summer cigarettes,  
smoke wisping from your mouth  
to mine. You complained  
of the lush, chigger-and-cicada-soaked  
Kansas nights while I  
catastrophized Minneapolis  
on my fingertips,  
yet I would keep my tongue,  
your darkneses, secret, savor for days  
your taste, as if, by believing,  
I might give birth from  
my bony hips, as if  
my faith would become  
an unending summer solstice but  
I am too tropical, humid,  
an intemperate mist when  
your winters seem endless.

On November sidewalks our toes meet again  
bound by socks and boots,  
uneven bricks between them,  
and I stumble over  
the simplest beginning.

## **closing**

And so  
it comes to a close,  
with some sadness, then;  
everything thins out  
and perishes  
in a second.

Every possible future  
has been pre-packaged;  
this sad century  
has barely opened  
to muffled explosions,  
but insists,  
persists,  
already an unwanted memory.

These years  
are unreturnable gifts  
shrink-wrapped and dusting  
on a shelf in God's closet,  
their receipts long lost  
among the ribbons and bows,  
wrapped candies,  
and brightly-painted grenades.